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S E C R E T SECTION 01 OF 03 THE HAGUE 003015

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TAGS: [PREL](#) [PGOV](#) [MARR](#) [MOPS](#) [IZ](#) [NL](#) [NATO](#) [EUN](#)

SUBJECT: NETHERLANDS/IRAQ: RECONFIGURING THE DUTCH PRESENCE

REF: A. THE HAGUE 2766 AND PREVIOUS

[B.](#) HOOIJKAAS E-MAIL 11/15/04 ("POLITICS IN THE NETHERLANDS") AND PREVIOUS

Classified By: AMBASSADOR CLIFFORD SOBEL FOR REASONS 1.4 (B) AND (D).

[1.](#) (C) SUMMARY: A clear consensus in the Cabinet and parliament exists for concluding the Dutch deployment in Al Muthanna as scheduled. The government's November 12 letter to parliament states Dutch troops will end their current mission in mid-March, although some personnel will stay longer (we understand six to eight weeks) to draw down the deployment, and the Netherlands will remain militarily engaged in Iraq through the NATO training mission. The parliament chose not to debate the letter, reflecting the strongly held view that the government's decision is final. Extensive Embassy contacts with parliamentarians over the last few weeks confirms the view that, with the exception of Kamp's own Liberals, there is virtually no support for a fourth extension of the mission. FM Bot told Ambassador Sobel on November 15 that a solid majority in the Cabinet, including PM Balkenende, supports ending the mission as scheduled. Kamp told Amb. Sobel on November 18 that he was sensitive to SecDef's suggestion the Dutch not characterize the end of their mission in Al Muthanna as the end of their military presence in Iraq. He also reiterated that he was clear in his conversation with SecDef as to intention to end the mission as scheduled. The uniformed military leadership, including CHOD Berlijn, stand firmly behind the Kamp's decision. Although the British Ambassador has instructions to pursue the possibility of extending the Dutch presence, he advises that Balkenende has told Blair directly that this will not happen. We will continue to pursue the Dutch interest in the NATO training mission and other options for retaining a Dutch military presence in Iraq before revisiting the question of extending the Al Muthanna deployment (in tandem with the UK and IIG) closer to the January 2005 elections. END SUMMARY.

DUTCH GOVERNMENT RESTATES INTENTION TO WITHDRAW

[2.](#) (C) The Dutch government sent a letter to the Second Chamber of Parliament on November 12 describing its plans for Iraq over the next several months (ref B). As expected, the letter, signed by FM Bot, Defense Minister Kamp, and Development Minister Van Ardenne, reiterated the previously stated position that the Dutch mission in Al Muthanna will conclude in mid-March of 2005, with the expectation that local Iraqi forces will, as scheduled, assume responsibility for security in the region. In contrast to previous government statements (most notably by Bot), the letter made no reference to "extraordinary" or "unforeseen circumstances" having a bearing on a Dutch decision; the letter allows, however, that the "clearing out" of the mission "will take some time thereafter." The letter also states that the Dutch government intends to make a "proportional contribution" to NATO and EU training missions in Iraq, noting in that context that "the departure of the Dutch contingent from Al Muthanna does not mean the end of the Dutch military involvement in Iraq."

NO DEBATE IN PARLIAMENT

[3.](#) (C) In an unusual move, the foreign affairs and defense committees of the Second Chamber took note of the letter on November 16 but announced that there was "no need" for further public debate. Had a debate taken place, it was expected that an overwhelming majority would have expressed support for the government's stated position, with only the conservative Liberal Party (VVD) pushing for an additional extension. Liberal party foreign affairs spokesman Hans van Baalen later declared that he had chosen not to force the issue at this time, but might revisit it later depending on the situation in Iraq closer to the elections.

[4.](#) (C) Embassy contacts with parliamentary leaders -- including floor leaders and defense spokesman for all three coalition parties as well as members of the main opposition party -- confirm that there is no stomach in parliament for a divisive debate on this issue at this time. At least two major parties -- the Liberal Democrats (D-66) and the main opposition Labor Party (PvdA) -- are firmly opposed to a fourth extension, and only supported a third extension (last June) on the basis of assurances from Kamp that it would be

the last. (Comment: This is the crux of the matter for Kamp. He feels he has given his word and believes altering course may damage his credibility and undermine his relationship with parliament. End Comment). The Christian Democrats (CDA) -- Bot and Balkenende's party -- are also opposed to an extension of the current mission, although individual members have told us they do not rule out a reintroduction of Dutch troops at some point in the future.

STRONG CONSENSUS IN CABINET

15. (C) In a November 15 meeting with Amb. Sobel, FM Bot stressed that the cabinet was firmly behind the decision to draw down the Al Muthanna deployment on schedule. Bot said that he had been alone in advocating a more flexible position, but his effort to retain a reference to "unforeseen circumstances" had run up against stiff opposition from Kamp, with most other cabinet ministers following his lead "in lock step." Bot described PM Balkenende as "adamant" that the Dutch government end the deployment after eight months in accordance with the agreement it made with parliament last June. In a separate meeting, Rob Swartbol, Balkenende's senior foreign policy advisor, confirmed that there had been "broad consensus" within the cabinet during its discussion of the draft letter on November 12.

16. (C) According to Bot, Kamp was personally (and, he suggested, emotionally) committed to concluding the Dutch mission in Al Muthanna no later than mid-March. In addition to the cabinet, Bot argued that Kamp had now also convinced the senior military service chiefs to support a draw down which they had earlier opposed. (Note: This has been confirmed through our own contacts with the uniformed military, including by CHOD Berlijn.) Bot said that he found Kamp's arguments -- that the Netherlands has already done more than its fair share, and that the Dutch troops might be needed for missions in Africa later -- unconvincing, but they had resonance with the public.

KAMP CLARIFIES DUTCH PLANS

17. (S) On November 18, Kamp told Ambassador Sobel that he made clear in his telephone conversation with SecDef that the Dutch would not abandon Iraq. The current Dutch deployment will be maintained at full strength until March 15; at that point, a "new group" of soldiers will be sent in for a short period (six-eight weeks) to facilitate the draw down and handover of regional control to the Iraqis. Kamp anticipated that the British might send "a few troops" to the region at this time. In response to a question from the Ambassador, Kamp said that he expected the Dutch contingent of a future NATO training mission to be about 100 troops (Note: We have heard from other sources that the Dutch plan to provide approximately 30 trainers, possibly in addition to the 100 troops.) He did not know the details of how those troops would be deployed exactly, but took note of NATO's pressing requirement for force protection. Looking ahead, Kamp said the Dutch may contribute to the NATO strategic reserve for the Balkans, in addition to fulfilling their NRF rotation commitment in 2005, and are also looking at sending special forces possibly to SE Afghanistan in support of OEF as well as F-16's to Afghanistan. He noted that the Dutch were finalizing their plans for next year and would be able to announce them shortly. Kamp reaffirmed that Dutch Apaches and Chinooks currently overseas needed to be recalled to the Netherlands for "reconditioning," but did not rule out the possibility that they might be redeployed in the region again in the second half of 2005.

CONCLUSIONS AND NEXT STEPS

18. (C) Kamp's strongly held view has cemented consensus in the cabinet and parliament that the Dutch deployment in Al Muthanna should conclude on schedule in mid-March with no additional extensions. In our view, direct requests for the Dutch to reverse the decision made last June (and reaffirmed in the November 12 letter) at this time have virtually no chance of success. The British and Japanese, for example, are pushing the Dutch hard to extend the Al Muthanna mission, but have made no headway. (British Ambassador Budd told us that Balkenende rejected a direct request from PM Blair on November 12.) Some -- like van Baalen and Bot -- continue to assert that "unforeseen circumstances" could compel the Dutch to stay longer in Al Muthanna, but this is impossible to predict and, in any case, would probably mean only a short extension of a few weeks.

19. (C) On the other hand, nearly all our Dutch interlocutors have stressed that a continuing Dutch presence in Iraq via the NATO mission demonstrates that the Netherlands' ongoing commitment to Iraq. We will push hard to lock in a substantial Dutch component for the NATO mission -- perhaps including force protection -- and look for other ways to

involve the Dutch in Iraq and Afghanistan, using Kamp's own arguments to support our case. Although we will have to overcome the perception, shared by Kamp and many others, that the Dutch are already doing more than their "fair share" in Iraq and Afghanistan, we believe the Dutch government will be more receptive to approaches along these lines. We do not rule out the possibility of extending the Dutch mission in Al Muthanna, and will continue to push for it, but every signal we have received here suggests this is not the right time to force the issue; instead, we believe we should pocket what we can now and then seek to revisit the issue in January or February (closer to the elections.) We also will look for opportunities to modify the public debate from emphasizing the Al Muthanna draw down to focus more explicitly on the continued Dutch engagement in Iraq.

SOBEL